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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1059
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1762
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2345
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: USCIRF'S COSMAN HEARS DIFFERENT VIEWS ON
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Catherine Cosman, Senior Analyst for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), met June 4 - 11 with Kazakhstani civil society and religious leaders and government officials, to discuss the country's policy on religious freedom. The representatives of the "traditional" religions predictably highlighted Kazakhstan's track record of religious tolerance, while representatives of "non-traditional" groups asserted that the government's policy towards them was growing more hostile. Meetings with the government proved somewhat contentious, with the representatives of the MFA and the MOJ's Religious Issues Committee arguing that some of USCIRF's reporting can be "biased" and unbalanced. END SUMMARY.
TWO VIEWS ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION

3. (SBU) During her June 4 - 11 trip to Almaty and Astana, USCIRF's Cathy Cosman met with leaders of civil society, representatives of religious organizations, and government officials. As has been the case in the past, the representatives of "non-traditional" religious groups, like the Ahmadi Muslims, Protestants, and Scientologists, gave a vastly different assessment of Kazakhstan's record on religious freedom than their counterparts from the Orthodox Church and the Spiritual Association of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK). While welcoming the recent decision of the Constitutional Council to overturn the draft law on religion, the smaller religious groups were unanimous in asserting that the government's policy toward "non-traditional" religions was growing more hostile. Ahmadi Muslims and Protestants reported several instances of local law enforcement representatives attending services, writing down the names of the participants, and asking the congregation members whether they joined the religious community freely or were "coerced." The representative of the Church of Scientology outlined the several administrative cases facing the church, including a case for tax evasion and for unauthorized pharmaceutical activities. On a more positive note, the Almaty Hare Krishnas told us that the local and oblast (region) authorities seem to be committed to finding an appropriate land plot as a substitute for the contested land plot where the community is now. Apparently, as the Krishnas told us, the oblast akim (regional governor) flies to Astana on a monthly basis to update the Presidential Administration on the progress of the dispute.

14. (SBU) In contrast, the representatives of SAMK, the Orthodox Church, and the Jewish community shared their belief that the government is wholeheartedly committed to promoting religious tolerance. All three highlighted their "open dialogue" with other confessions and cited the upcoming Congress of World Religions -- an international forum that takes place in Astana every three years -- as proof of President Nazarbayev's commitment to religious understanding. Father Andrey of the Orthodox Church told us that he supported the draft law on religion because it would have established greater control over "foreign pseudo-religions which lack certain morals."

THE GOVERNMENT TAKES ISSUE

15. (SBU) In Astana, Cosman met with representatives of the Religious Issues Committee (RIC), the President's Human Rights Commission, and the MFA's America's Directorate. The head of the RIC Ardak Doszhan showed great familiarity with USCIRF's most recent report on Kazakhstan. He thanked USCIRF for its "frank" reporting, but noted that several aspects of the report "did not present both sides of the story." In particular, he asserted that USCIRF's report "shows bias" when it criticizes the government for the failing to resolve the Hare Krishna land dispute or for the fines that are imposed on Baptists who refuse to register on principle, but fails to point out that both the Hare Krishnas and the Baptists "did not follow the law." We heard similar comments from Askar Tazhiyev, the Head of MFA's America's Directorate, who proceeded to go through the report and challenge particular choices of phrasing. For example, he argued that USCIRF's assertion that Protestant groups sometimes face harassment from the government is "patently untrue" because the number of registered Protestant groups greatly

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outnumbers the Orthodox and Muslim religious entities. He also took issue with the report's coverage of the cases against the Church of Scientology -- "This is a group that is banned in Germany, France, and Belgium!" he argued passionately. We countered that the report does not aim to judge the merit of the cases against the Scientologists, but rather to highlight certain inconsistencies and the lack of transparency in the investigation. Tazhiyev agreed that the actions of law enforcement "sometimes fell short of international standards."

16. (SBU) Catherine Cosman did not/not clear this cable.

HOAGLAND